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NEA/PPD, NEA/MAG (HARRIS), CTCC (VAN DE VELDE)

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TAGS: [KISL](#) [KPAO](#) [PTER](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: IDENTIFYING "CREDIBLE VOICES" IN MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

REF: STATE 122288

Classified By: Ambassador Robert Godec for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (S) SUMMARY. In general, it is GOT officials who speak out against religious extremism and terrorism on a regular and open basis. President Ben Ali, GOT ministers and La Presse (the official media outlet of the GOT) regularly issue statements warning against the threat of extremist ideologies and groups. Given the control of the GOT over the media environment, universities and public speaking events, Tunisian intellectuals, academics and other media figures are less likely to speak about these issues in an open forum or with as much credibility as the "designated" GOT spokespersons. Few are credible or influential among Tunisians, let alone with any wider pan-Arab audience. In this atmosphere, there are still a few individuals who present credible arguments against extremism, albeit with criticism of US policy in the region as a subtext for their listeners. However, few of these individuals are well known outside of Tunisia. END SUMMARY.

#### GOVERNMENT MESSENGERS

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12. (S) In Tunisia, it is GOT leaders themselves who speak out against extremism. One prominent, secular civil-society leader, when queried about who she thought was the best personality to speak out on these issues answered, "President Ben Ali, no question." Meanwhile, a local Sufi religious leader opined that, although the Minister of Religious Affairs often speaks out against extremism, his words are not effective, especially among those in the population with Islamist leanings.

#### CREDIBLE JOURNALISTS

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13. (S) There are a number of Tunisian journalists who have incorporated thoughtful commentary on the dangers of extremism and the trap of terrorism as a solution for political or societal problems. These journalists all write for magazines and newspapers published in the capital city, Tunis, and most are between the ages of 35 and 45 years old. They are Sunni; however, they are primarily secularist and supportive of the Tunisian secular political system. All regularly write pieces critical of US policy and actions in the Middle East, which lends them credibility with their readers. These journalists speak out against extremism, not because they agree with the US position or rhetoric on this issue, but because they are convinced that violence and terrorism are dangerous for the stability of their country and the future of the region. However, on recent trips around the country, various Embassy officers have noted that few Tunisians are actually reading the papers whose total publication numbers are (charitably) 300,000 copies daily for a population of over ten million people. Post regularly

invites these journalists to press events and receptions. Only one of these media outlets (Dar As-Sabah) has received a USG grant.

¶A. Kamel Ben Younes, private daily As Sabah:

While no fan of US foreign policy, Ben Younes is generally balanced in his reporting and has regularly spoken out against violence and extremism and for dealing with the root causes of youth disenfranchisement in his editorials. Ben Younis is also a correspondent for the BBC Arabic service and well known in regional media circles.

¶B. Mohamed Moncef Ben M'rad, private weekly Al Akhbar Al Joumhouriya:

Ben M'Rad is something of a patriarch of the Tunisian journalistic community, and his thoughtful op-eds are the most interesting element of an otherwise "light" newspaper. He, too, has weighed in on many of the issues of the day to oppose violence and extremism and encourage a rational approach to dealing with Israel. Most recently, he offered strong support for the position of As Sabah/Le Temps and Zied El Heni of the Association des journalistes tunisiens (AJT) in favor of the "Dove of Peace" youth art competition, discussions of which intimated the need for normalization with Israel.

¶C. Hmida Ben Romdhane, government daily La Presse:

Despite his somewhat restricted position at government daily La Presse, Ben Romdane does weave an anti-extremist and anti-violence thread through much of his work, and has even privately circulated some editorials along these lines that were rejected or censored by his editor for suggesting greater Arab responsibilities for such issues.

¶D. Borhane Bsaies, freelance journalist, often publishing in private daily As Sabah, private weekly magazine Realites and al-Jazeera:

While often vehemently opposed to United States foreign policy and very close to Tunisian powers-that-be, Bsaies is reasoned and open-minded in his approach and does speak out against terrorism. Since he stands far away from the US on most issues, he is likely to have the greatest credibility in the most anti-US circles.

¶E. Zied El Heni, As Sahafa/AJT:

While his work as a journalist at government As Sahafa is more staid, El Heni's great contribution is as an activist for press freedom and other issues within the Association des journalistes tunisiens (AJT) and in the greater journalistic community. Most recently he has been blasted online and by some other journalists for an interview he gave to Magharebia.com in which he lauded a joint Arab-Israeli peace art project and suggested that normalization was the logical path to take.

¶F. Ridha Kefi, Le Temps/L'Expression:

Certainly the most forward-leaning of Tunisian journalists on this topic, Kefi has regularly and at some personal cost spoken out against terrorism and the sensationalist journalism that fans the flames of extremism. He was particularly vocal in the wake of recent terrorist incidents in Tunisia (December 2006-January 2007) and in decrying the hero-worship that followed the execution of Saddam Hussein. While Kefi is a strong voice, his association with a partially MEPI-funded series of roundtables may hurt his credibility in the most anti-US circles. Kefi is well known regionally for his previous stint at Jeune Afrique magazine and has participated in conferences on media and political issues.

¶G. Zyed Krichene, Ralits

While not usually the first to speak out, Krichene has regularly used his pulpit as editor-in-chief of Tunisia's main news weekly to condemn violence and extremism, both under his own byline and by facilitating the publication of commentators like Bohane Bsaies.

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¶4. (S) Few academics, intellectuals, universities or think tanks in Tunisia deal directly with the topic of terrorism or extremism. There are no university departments solely devoted to political science where US foreign policy or global terrorism are discussed. And, the institution dedicated to training future imams and religious scholars, the Zeitouna, is firmly under the control of the GOT. Several conferences were held in 2006-07 on the topic of religious tolerance by the universities in Tunis, but participants were careful to leave discussion of controversial topics to the GOT. There are a few exceptions to this general trend:

¶A. Professor AbdelJelil Temimi. Dr. Temimi, in his seventies, is the founder of the Foundation Temimi pour la recherche scientifique et l'information (FTERSI) and a well known scholar of Ottoman and Morisco Studies. He has published over 29 books and 120 articles of his own research and dozens of edited works. Temimi is familiar to academic circles in the US and Europe, as well as the Middle East. His research center, originally founded in Zaghoun in the 1980's - but now in Tunis, holds weekly seminars, many of which are on sensitive topics such as censorship in the Arab world or why democracy has not progressed in the region. The majority of participants in his seminars are academics, diplomats and intellectuals. When permitted by the GOT, he publishes the proceedings of his conferences (currently his volumes on a series of seminars on censorship are being censored in Tunisia and he is now seeking a publisher outside the country). According to Dr. Temimi, he has been pressured over the last few years by the GOT and "unknown" assailants to desist his indirect criticism of GOT policies by holding seminars highlighting the vision of the former President Bourguiba and, instead, to hold a seminar on President Ben Ali and the accomplishments of his tenure in office. He continues to resist. This academic honesty and courage give him credibility and his reknown in western academic circles offers him some protection.

¶B. Hamadi Redissi, an author and academic, has published many articles supporting a moderate Islam and secular policies. Dr. Redissi is a professor at the University of Tunis in the Faculty of Law and Political Science. He is the author of numerous articles and books on Islam and Politics. A compendium of many of these works covers several pages on Google. Redissi is outspoken; however, he has little influence in Tunisia outside a small intellectual elite. He regularly attends regional and European and US conferences, presenting papers on a variety of topics relating to Islam and politics. Redissi will be a visiting scholar at Yale University for the 2008 spring semester.

¶C. Taieb Baccouche, an independent thinker and respected intellectual with an important past role in Tunisia's largest labor union, has influence among orgnaized labor rank and file. He also enjoys credibility as a human rights activist in the Arab world - outside of Tunisia.

¶D. Nejib Chebbi, an articulate and engaging intellectual and the former Secretary General of the opposition Popular Democratic Party (PDP), is also a founding member of the Movement of 18 October, which for the first time brought together secular and moderate Islamist opposition to the GOT. While he is vilified by some secularists for being in "bed with the Islamists," he is widely respected among moderate Islamists in Tunisia.

COMMENT  
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¶5. (S) This Ramadan, the GOT gave a permit for a new religious radio station and website (at a time when many other requests are pending). President Ben Ali recently gave an exclusive interview to the station praising its "moderation." No doubt, this will be another effort by the GOT to mold the message and influence the debate on religious extremism in Tunisia. Journalist Borhan Bessais echoed the

theme of the president on 9/16 in As Sabah that the new station, Zeitouna, "shows there is no contradiction between Islam and modernity." Last year at this same time, the GOT organized a concerted campaign against the veil. Ministers, police, journalists and the Tunisian Women's Association (Union national des femmes tunisiennes) coordinated to ban the veil during Ramadan as a foreign import and against Tunisian tradition. Several of the implementers of this campaign, a GOT official and the head of the Tunisian Women's Association, expressed their concern to the PAO that if they did not work quickly, the influence of people like Amr Khaled and stations like al Iqra would erode all the secular, liberal progress that Tunisia has made over the last fifty years. The GOT sees the threat clearly and has attempted to take direct action, albeit with the unintended consequence of decreasing their credibility with Islamists and those disaffected with the government through drastic measures such as last year's heavy-handed campaign of police removing veils from students entering universities and women walking in the street.

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